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THE TRANSFER OF THE ASSYRIANS OF IRAQ

Description

A short historical survey of the Assyrian minority in Iraq and its unsuccessful attempts at emigration.

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SUMMARY

Some 25,000 Assyrians, who had come to Iraq as refugees at the end of the first World War, have attempted ever since to emigrate, but have been unable to find a country of reception. They now hope for resettlement by the Allies at the end of this war.

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THE TRANSFER OF THE ASSYRIANS OF IRAQ

I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of the resettlement of the Assyrian population of Iraq is one which has occupied international attention since early in the last war. The problem in itself is a minor one, since it involves a very small ethnic-religious group. Because international machinery has been invoked, however, the issue assumes some significance, and serves to indicate the difficulties which arise in population transfers of this character.

Recent intelligence indicates that the leaders of the Assyrian minority in Iraq have decided to organize their followers in order to seek recognition at the Peace Conference, expressing the hope that, under the Atlantic Charter, the United States will aid them in finding a place to settle.

In view of the probable revival of interest in the problem, and as an indication of the nature of some of the problems involved in resettlement, the present report seeks to present an historical review of the events connected with the Assyrian transfer.

II. THE BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

The Assyrians (or Nestorians) are described by the Information Section of the League of Nations as a "Nation-Church" bearing "the shadowy heritage of the ancient name of Assyrian," and being "undoubted successors of the greatness of the Assyrian Church."[1] At the outbreak of World War I their number was estimated at 155,000, comprising three main groups:[2]

80,000 inhabited the Tigris valley, from the plain of Mosul to the hilly country.
35,000 inhabited the plateaus of Urmia and Salmas in Persian Azerbaijan and in the mountains of the Persian side of the border.

1. League of Nations Questions, No. 5, The Settlement of the Assyrians. Geneva, 1935. Information Section, p.3.
2. Simpson, Sir John Hope. The Refugee Problem. Report of a survey. 1939, p. 47. It should be noted in this connection that all economic and demographic data for this area are only approximate.

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40,000 lived in the Hakkiari mountains, in the neighborhood of the frontiers of Turkey, Russia, and Persia.

When Turkey entered the last war in November 1914, both the Turks and the Russians bid for the support of the Hakkiari Assyrians. In the spring of 1915 the Assyrians decided to join the Allies. After determined resistance, they were driven by the Turkish forces from their mountain homes. Some 40,000 took refuge at Urmia at the end of 1915. Together with the Persian Assyrians they fought on the side of the Russians until the Russian front collapsed in 1917. They managed to hold out for over a year, but in the summer of 1918 the 70,000 Urmia and Hakkiari Assyrians had no alternative but to retreat in the direction of the British forces in Mesopotamia. Moving 300 miles southeastward with their families, livestock, and possessions, they suffered heavily from attacks by the Turks, Kurds, and Persians. Less than 50,000 ultimately reached the British garrison in Hamadan.[1]

They were housed in several large refugee camps set up under British auspices in the neighborhood of Baghdad or Mosul. Some of the Urmia refugees returned to Persia. The group from districts south of the Hakkiari mountains also returned. But the mountain tribes, numbering some 15,000 persons, remained in Iraq. Efforts were made to enable them to return to their old homes, in the hope that the boundary between Turkey and Iraq would be so drawn as to include that area in Iraq. However, the Council of the League of Nations assigned, in December 1925, the Hakkiari district to Turkey.[2] The Turkish government decided that the Turkish Amnesty Law did not cover the Assyrians who had fought against Turkey in the war, and that they would not be permitted to re-enter Turkey. Assyrians who had reoccupied their old homes were driven out by armed force.[3]

1. League of Nations Questions, No. 5, p.5; Simpson, op.cit., p.49.
2. Special Report of H.M. Government on the Progress of Iraq, 1920-1931. (C.O. 58 of 1931), p. 207.
3. Toynbee. Survey of International Affairs, 1925, Vol. I, p. 501.

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III. ATTEMPTS AT RESETTLEMENT

As a result of the rejection of the Assyrians by Turkey, it became necessary to face the prospect of establishing a permanent home for more than 20,000 Assyrians who were scattered at that period over the Mosul liwa within the boundaries of the Iraq State. Although the Mosul liwa had an estimated density of population of only 22 persons per square kilometer of cultivated area,[1] the Iraq government declared that it offered no possibility for a mass resettlement of the Assyrians. The creation of an Assyrian enclave in the Arbil liwa (15 persons per square kilometer of cultivated land)[2] proved to be impossible, as it would have involved removal of a Kurdish and Iraqi agricultural population to provide the required land.[3] However, the failure of all the envisaged resettlement schemes cannot be ascribed to lack of land for resettlement. Iraq is one of the most underpopulated countries in the world. Its area is 370,000 square kilometers and its population in 1920 did not exceed 2,850,000. "The density of population in Iraq is low even in comparison with the low level common to the neighboring Oriental countries," states Alfred Bonne.[4] In a paper prepared in 1926 for the Royal Central Asian Society, Ja'far Pasha al Askari, the Prime Minister of Iraq, stated: "What Iraq wants above everything is more population."

The real causes of the failure of all the attempts to settle the Assyrians in Iraq in a single homogeneous community are described by the League of Nations' Information Section as "ill-feeling between certain sections of the Arab population and this (Assyrian) small Christian minority," the greater part of

1. Bonne, Alfred. The Economic Development of the Middle East. Jerusalem, 1943, p. 108.
2. Ibid.
3. Simpson, op. cit., p. 52.
4. Bonne, op. cit., p. 107.

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which was not indigenous to the country.[1] The idea of a closed Assyrian settlement in Iraq was abandoned. The alternate solution, individual absorption of the Assyrians into the Iraqi population, but with the maintenance of their religious freedom appears to have had reasonable prospects of success. Many Assyrians received land, and, by the end of 1930, it was estimated that only about 300 families remained to be settled.[2]

However, the Anglo-Iraq treaty of 30 June 1930, which provided for the surrender by Great Britain of the Iraq mandate and the independence of Iraq, created much anxiety among the Assyrians, who were well aware of the problems faced by ethnic and religious minorities in an independent Arab state. In October 1931, Assyrian petitions presented to the League of Nations stated that "it will be impossible for them (the Assyrians) to live in Iraq after the withdrawal of the (British) Mandate. They therefore ask that arrangements be made for the transfer of the Assyrians in Iraq to a country under the rule of the Western Nations, or, if this is not possible, to Syria."[3] The Iraq declaration, in May 1932, including guaranties for the protection of minorities, had by no means dissipated these apprehensions. In 1932, when Iraq became a member of the League of Nations, the League's Council had before it petitions from the Assyrians asking that they be either transferred to a different country whose protection they could enjoy, or that they be settled in Iraq in a compact community possessing local autonomy. The Council adopted, the view, however, that the demand for administrative autonomy within Iraq could not be accepted; on the other hand no territory for a compact community of Assyrians from Iraq was made available.[4]

1. League of Nations Questions, No. 5, p. 12.
2. Ibid., p. 13.
3. Malek, Jusut. The British Betrayal of the Assyrians. Chicago, 1936, p. 205.
4. League of Nations Questions, No. 5, p. 15.

Disappointed in the results of their representations, some 800 men, leaving their families behind, crossed the Syrian border on 22 July 1933, in the belief that the French authorities would provide them with land. They were, however, ordered by the French to return to Iraq. After they crossed the frontier again a clash with local detachments of the Iraqi Army occurred. Many of them were killed and wounded. Some 550 took refuge in Syria, where they were interned by the French authorities. As a consequence of this incident, passions were inflamed on both sides. A violent agitation convulsed the country. It culminated in the wholesale massacre of Assyrian men in Simmel, on 11 August 1933, while in 60 neighboring villages robbing and looting continued during the following days. The survivors, some 1,500, mostly women and children, were sent by the Iraq Government to a camp at Mosul.[1]

These tragic events convinced all parties involved that the Assyrian problem in Iraq was beyond local remedy. The Iraq Government impressed upon the Council of the League of Nations that it was essential to provide a new home for those Assyrians "who wished to leave or were unable peaceably to be incorporated into the Iraqi State."[2] The Council was unanimously of the same opinion. It set up on 15 September 1933, a Committee of Six to prepare a scheme for transfer and permanent settlement of the Iraqi Assyrian community.

"From October 1933 to the middle of 1935," reports the informative publication of the League of Nations, "the Committee searched the world for a suitable place in which to settle the Assyrian people, and there is not a continent in which it did not consider possibilities."[3] Investigation commissions were

1. League of Nations Questions, No. 5, pp.16-17; Simpson, op.cit., p. 53.
2. League of Nations. Official Journal, December 1933, p. 1645.
3. League of Nations Questions, No. 5, p. 22.

sent to the state of Parana in Brazil, and to British Guiana. The Parana report was favorable, but the project had to be abandoned owing to the adoption by the Brazilian Parliament of a law restricting immigration. The investigation in British Guiana led to the conclusion that it is "more than doubtful whether the Assyrians could be settled there on a sufficiently large scale."[1]

The Committee therefore concentrated its attention on the possibilities of transfer and settlement of the Assyrians in Syria, where a nucleus and a precedent had already been established in 1934 when the 550 Assyrians who had taken refuge there in August 1933 were settled provisionally in the Upper Khabur valley; later, they were allowed to send for their families who had remained in Iraq (some 1,450 persons). There had also been an additional influx of Assyrians from Iraq and by September 1935 some 6,000 Assyrians were living in the Khabur area; they were rapidly becoming self-supporting with regard to the more important foodstuffs.[2]

Both Turkey and Iraq were, however, averse to the mass settlement of Assyrians in Khabur, which is situated near the Turkish and Iraq frontiers.[3] The French authorities finally agreed to allow th permanent establishment of the Assyrians (not only of those who had been provisionally settled in Khabur, but also of those who had remained in Iraq and wished to settle elsewhere) in the sparsely populated and marshy Ghab plain in the Alarvite territory which had the advantage of being remote from these frontiers (it was situated some 25 miles to the northwest of Hama and about the same distance from the sea). As another advantage of the Ghab settlement, it was stressed that the immediate neighbors of

1. Ibid., pp. 23-24.
2. League of Nations Documents. C 352, M 179, 1935, VII.
3. Simpson, op. cit., p. 54.

the prospective Assyrian settlers were the Christian groups and that the administrative authority to which they would be ultimately subject was the separate district of Latakia, administered by a French Governor and inhabited almost exclusively by non-Moslem groups.[1] Some 24,000 Assyrians from the Mosul area -- even those who had property and did not complain of conditions -- expressed the unconditional wish to leave for the Ghab "without asking for any details of their future settlement." On the other hand a group of six tribal chiefs claiming to speak for 8,000 Assyrians said that they could not state their view until they knew what would be their economic and legal position in their new home. Similar results were registered at Kirkuk and Baghdad.[2] The Assyrians were ready to go. The Iraqi Government was ready to let them go and offered even a contribution of £125,000, calculated on a basis of £10 for every Assyrian leaving Iraq up to 12,500 persons;[3] later it doubled this offer.[4] The cost of the whole Ghab settlement scheme was calculated at 86 million French francs (a little over £1,075,000). The following contributions were enlisted:[5]

£250,000 from the Iraq Government
£250,000 " " British Government
£356,000 " " Government of the French Mandated Territories
£ 81,000 " " League of Nations

Thus, some £937,000 out of £1,075,000 were provided for, a sum adequate to secure a material amount of progress with the Ghab scheme. Detailed irrigation, settlement, educational, and administrative projects were elaborated.

The Information Section of the League of Nations stated early in 1935 that the League "has now initiated and helped to finance a scheme for their (Assyrian) transfer from Iraq and

1. League of Nations Questions, No.5, pp. 27,30.
2. League of Nations Documents. C 352, M 159, 1935, VII, p. 9.
3. Ibidem.
4. League of Nations Questions, No.5, p. 44.
5. Simpson, op. cit., p. 54.

settlement in the Levant states -- a work of humanity and appeasement."[1] The Khabur settlement was considered a temporary expedient, pending the completion of Ghab scheme.

IV. BREAK-DOWN OF THE RESETTLEMENT PLAN

In the spring of 1935 the situation completely and abruptly changed. In two letters, addressed by the French Government to the Chairman of the League's Committee for the settlement of the Assyrians on 14 April 1935, and later to the Secretary-General of the League on 23 June 1936, the French Government announced its decision to apply for the termination of the French Mandate in Syria.[2] In view of the growing nationalist feeling among the Arabs of Syria who bitterly opposed the establishment of another Christian minority in the country, prospects of a successful settlement of Assyrians in the Ghab area were practically eliminated.

The League's Committee for the settlement of Assyrians was thus forced to recommend to the Council the definite abandonment of the Ghab scheme. On 4 July 1936, the Council approved this recommendation. It instructed the Committee to study the possibilities of "settlement elsewhere than in Iraq of the Assyrians of Iraq who still wished to leave that country." But "all these studies and investigations proved fruitless." The Committee therefore reached the definite conclusion that the settlement outside of Iraq of those Assyrians who still remained there did not at that time seem to be practicable. It stated further that it was also impossible to arrange for the transfer of the Assyrians settled in the Khabur valley in Syria, whose number had in the meantime reached 8,800.[3]

The transfer of Assyrians had thus come to nought. The League of Nations Council failed in its efforts to secure the

1. League of Nations Questions, No. 5; p. 46.
2. League of Nations Documents. C 387, M 258, 1937, VIII, and C 440, 1937, VII.
3. League of Nations Documents. C 387, M 258, 1937, VII.

settlement of some 25,000 to 30,000 Assyrians who had since 1919 been the object of international attention. Admitting its own failure, the Resettlement Committee decided that:

a. The Assyrians who remained in Iraq "will have to continue to reside in Iraq" and the Committee "will not be called to deal with them." These Assyrians should, as far as possible, become incorporated in the Iraqi population as ordinary citizens of the Iraqi State."[1] The League's Council took note of the vague declaration of the Iraqi Foreign Minister that the Assyrian community in Iraq will "enjoy the benefits of the declaration on the protection of minorities signed by the Iraqi Government... on 19 May 1932."[2]

b. The Khabur settlement which was to be abolished as soon as the Ghab lands had been made ready to receive the whole of the Assyrians transferred from Iraq, was now proclaimed a permanent home for the some 9,000 Assyrians living there. The League of Nations took over the direct responsibility for its consolidation on a self-supporting basis.[3] This decision completely ignored the paramount problem of the Khabur settlement, that of the security of a sedentary agricultural Christian population in a remote district, in close proximity to the Turkish frontier and liable to incursions of aggressive Moslem nomadic tribes. In a letter to The Times (5 January 1938) Canon Wigram stated that the area of the Khabur River "is regularly raided by Kurds and Bedouins, from whom no protection can be given." Sir John Hope Simpson cautiously observes that "the permanence of these (Khabur) colonies will depend on the attitude of the Syrian Government towards the Christian minorities after the termination of the Mandate."[4] The prospects seem not to be too bright. Professor W. F. Albright, who has lived in

1. League of Nations Documents, C 387, M 258, 1937, VII.
2. Minutes of the Council; 29 September 1937.
3. Minutes of the Council, 29 September 1937.
4. Op. cit., p. 58.

Palestine and Syria for many years and who had made personal contacts among numerous Christian Arabs reports that "the Christians of Syria have no more confidence in their eventual future as a minority in a Moslem State than the Nestorians (Assyrians) of Iraq or the Copts of Egypt, both of whom are hated and despised (quite unjustly) by the Moslems."1

1. Albright, W. F. Japhet in the Tents of Shem, Asia, December 1942.

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